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ABSTRACT

In Asia, the family unit has long been the foundation of society. The family system, instead of the government, provides social, economic, and emotional support to the individual as well as the family itself. Self-reliance and personal responsibility are nurtured within the family, but with increased urbanization and industrialization of Asia, the family unit is in danger of breaking down. This paper questions what will happen to the social structure if the family is weakened, and reflects on whether Asia will be able to preserve the family in its transition to modernization. It states that counselors can be helpful in assisting clients with decision-making by using opportunities for psychological counseling available via the Internet. The paper argues that counselors have been focusing exclusively on the internal aspects of families and have ignored the larger culture. They have been looking for pathology within the families and have not considered the impact of the larger system. The paper suggests that counselors address people's schedules to help them become less burdened, teach them how to live lives based upon their values, and help them develop a family mission statement and live by it. (JDM)

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THE INFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGY ON FAMILIES

6th International Counseling Conference - Counseling in the 21st Century

Beijing, China, May 28-30, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

Technological changes have been having an impact upon today's families. Some of the new core technologies are genetic engineering, advanced biochemistry, digital electronics, optical data storage, advanced computers, artificial intelligence, lasers, fiber optics, advanced satellites, and superconductors. They spawn products such as electronic notepads, multimedia computers, digital imaging, multisensory mobile robotics, videoconferencing, and digital cellular phones. According to Burris (1993) in his book Technotrends, the new technology creates new rules for living such as:

(1) if it works, it's obsolete;

(2) past success is your worst enemy;

(3) learn to fail fast:

(4) make rapid change your best friend;

(5) think ten years out and plan back to the present;

(6) time is the currency of the future;

(7) upgrade technology and upgrade people;

(8) find out what the other guy is doing and do something else; and

(9) take your biggest problem and skip it.

The rules of living are being transformed by technology. One observer referred to this generation as the first one to have been raised by TVs and other appliances. According to

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psychologist Mary Pipher (1997), media has become more of an influence than parents on children (p. 27). What is the impact of this technological change? Is it positive, negative, both? What is being done? What can counselors do? These are the questions that have been posed to counseling scholars from Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and China. Nowhere are the technological trends more far-reaching that Asia (Naisbett, 1996).

POSITIVE IMPACTS OF TECHNOLOGY ON FAMILIES

Technology is helping to make us a truly world community, as evidenced by this panel. None of us have ever met in person, but through the use of mail, e-mail, faxes, and phones we have been able to collaborate on this plenary symposium. The technology allows us to share the world and its happenings in an almost instantaneous fashion. There are over 700 million television sets in the world. Viewers are not only consumers of news and ideas, but also commercial goods. We have clear communication on a variety of topics and can harness our collective energies to solve large-scale problems. The technology also provides us with more leisure time, as much of the chores of the last century are now non-existent due to technological advances.

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF TECHNOLOGY ON FAMILIES

Despite these apparent positive advantages, there seem to be many negatives. Where is all this change headed? What or who are the casualties? The pace of life has been speeded up beyond recognition. No one sleeps any more. There are just too many options. People are so interested in being a part of the technological and corresponding knowledge explosion that they are living in the abstract world of television, e-mail, internet chat rooms, and even cybersex. We are minimizing our direct face-to-face contacts with people and living in a technological brave new world. Small and enduring communities with a

limited cast of significant others are being replaced by a vast and ever-expanded array of relationships. Psychologist Ken Gergen (1991) warns us, "the fully saturated self becomes no self at all" (p. 7). Time has speeded up with advances in technology. There is less and less float or turnaround time in transactions. Information is transmitted almost simultaneously with the events. Bank transactions now take place immediately with credit cards, etc.

How does all this speed and technological improvement affect us. Neil Postman in his book, The Disappearance of Childhood (1982), shows how the rapid development has affected children. His contention is that we do not have children any more. We have made everyone into adults. Everyone wears the same clothes, eats the same food, watches the same videos. The physiology is even changing, as the age of menarche drops by one year every ten years. The technological change has impacted our level of human growth and development. I guess nothing is permanent any more.

Due to the rapid technological changes, many jobs are being replaced as robotics, computers, and other advanced technology are making many jobs obsolete. At the beginning of this century, the leading job classification was that of farmer, and now it is less than 3% in the world.

Economic change and technological development, like wars or sporting tournaments, are not beneficial to all. People who are technologically literate become richer, and those who are not become further behind. The gap between the haves and have nots is widening.

ROLE OF THE COUNSELOR IN DEALING WITH FAMILIES THAT HAVE BEEN HARMED BY TECHNOLOGY

Counselors can be more helpful in assisting with decision-making, as there is more information available. There will be a multitude of opportunities for psychological education via the Internet and other media outlets. Unfortunately people become to rely

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less on themselves and more and more on machines. They challenge themselves less mentally and actually forget how to think. Recent research also states that Americans are being affected physically as well. Recent research states that Americans are becoming more overweight than at any other time in history. It appears as though labor-saving devices such as garage door openers, remote TV controls, and other technological devices are at fault. How else are we being impacted?

Families need to step back from their frenzied schedules and snap out of the media-induced trance of the consumer culture. Most families do not realize just what is happening to them. The metaphor for this is the old story of how the frog immediately jumps out of boiling water, but winds up poaching if you heat up the water slowly enough. Are we all being poached by technology? Pipher (1997) believes that we need to learn the word enough. She says that you are not the center of the universe. Your every need does not need to be gratified immediately. It's very important to learn to delay gratification. Sometimes the best thing you can do with suffering is to endure it. This is in direct opposition to the media that is telling us and our children "don't think, act on impulses."

Counselors have focused exclusively on the internal aspects of families and have ignored the larger culture. Counselors have been looking for pathology within the families. When problems have been occurring, we've blamed the individuals and the families and not considered the impact of the larger system. We've actually alienated people from their families.

Counselors need to treat people's schedules to help them become less burdened, to teach them how to live lives based upon their values, to develop a family mission statement and to live by it. If we don't do this, we will end up as Mary Pipher (1997) states: "It's becoming clearer and clearer to me that if families just let the culture happen to them, they end up fat, addicted, broke, with a houseful of junk and no time" (p. 32). I guess nothing fails like success.

CONCLUSION

The future will require us to anticipate, communicate, be flexible, integrate, and orchestrate. It will be important to anticipate future change, maintain high levels of communication, remain flexible, integrate as much as possible, and be creative as you orchestrate the symphony of your future and present life.

In Asia, the family unit has long been the foundation of society. The family system, instead of the government, provides social, economic, and emotional support to the individual as well as the family itself. Self-reliance and personal responsibility are nurtured within the family, but with increased urbanization and industrialization of Asia, the family unit is in danger of breaking down. If the family is weakened, what will happen to the social structure? As Asia is managing the transition to modernization, can the family be preserved in the process?

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